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Striking a Friendly Note

Intermission Is the Concert's Main Event

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For some folks, the most worthwhile part of any concert is intermission. It's a chance to amble meaningfully, scout the audience for friends and potential friends, show off their duds, sip a glass of white wine. Although they like the ambiance of the auditorium, these concert-goers have a hard time telling Schubert from Schumann, and think an arpeggio is a kind of Italian cupcake. After the break, they aren't back in their seats until the lights have dimmed.

To H. David Meyers, an oboist who does know his octaves, the solution was inevitable: make the intermission the main attraction. While amateur groups have always mixed recreation and music by such strategies as a dinner before or after the performance, the Beethoven Nightcappers—a concept started by Meyers that just held its 17th concert—seem to have taken the idea to its natural limit.

The last several concerts have been held at St. Patrick's Episcopal Church on Whitehaven Parkway in Northwest D.C. The church, which was completed last year, is a superior site: There's an ample stage for the musicians in the intimate, airy chapel; the acoustics are reasonable; and there's an adjoining hall that can be separated by sliding doors. Some of the music seeps into the hall even when these doors are closed, removing any absolute boundary between partying and listening to the music.

That's true of the whole evening, too. The first guests arrive at 9. A \$25 admission ticket gives them unlimited rights to the two bars and the various and generally adequate appetizers (sausages, meatballs, a nacho-style dip, and so on). At 10 p.m., most of the crowd heads into the chapel, drinks in hand. The informal group of 25 professional musicians—including Meyers on his oboe—play the allegro movement from a Mozart horn concerto, the adagio from the Mozart clarinet concerto and Telemann's concerto for two french horns.

After the orchestra's first half-hour set is over, the crowd goes back to nibbling, drinking and mingling. If the atmosphere tonight were a radio station, it would be labeled "the mellow sound." Says a guest named Dave,

who came with his girlfriend Fern: "People can strut their stuff here—get dressed up, go out and not feel bombarded with hassles. Look at me, I'm wearing leather pants and I'm not worried at all."

Is this, then, a good place to meet someone? Not if you ask Joelle Egger, who sells lingerie during the week: "I belong to a singles club, and was told there would be a lot of single men and whatnot here." So far, she's finding more of the latter: "A lot of people come here with dates. It's very nice, though."

Most people in the crowd seem to agree with that last opinion, if not necessarily the first. Their age range goes from late twenties all the way up; none appears eager to abuse the fact that they can have as many drinks as they wish. ("It's a vodka and tonic crowd, definitely," says a bartender.) At least a third of the men are in tuxes; many of the women are in long gowns.

Linda Bonnell is not only wearing an elaborate silver-satin dress with metallic lace, but she brought along the woman responsible. "Hey, Mom!" Linda yells, and, obediently enough, her mother appears. "I'm having a great time," says Mom. "At least, I was until she announces to the world that I'm a seamstress."

Like the kings of France, Linda apparently doesn't believe in traveling solo. Besides Mom, also present tonight are her boss, her brother and a girlfriend.

"It's such a rarity for a woman to be able to dress up but not have to have a date," says Linda, a television production time saleswoman. "Everyone talks to everyone here. It's not boring, like going to the symphony, and these aren't all just symphony-type people."

Linda doesn't ever quite make it back into the chapel for the musicians' second set. For one thing, she's approached by a man who uses a remodeled "Hey, we already know each other!" attack. "Will you keep it down?" is the first thing he says. "I just can't leave you alone without you wandering off."

They schmooze for a bit. "I'll tell you what I like about this place," he enthuses. "It's a wonderful group of people with eclectic ages and profes-

sions and interests, but they all have one thing in common: talent."

His talent is for disappearing. "I'll be right back," he tells Linda in mid-chat, and hotfoots it for the front door. He doesn't come back, not during the orchestra's rendition of Albinoni's concerto for two oboes and strings, Darius Milhaud's woodwind quintet, the allegro movement of the Dvorak wind serenade or even the finale of sing-along Christmas carols. Maybe he forgot to turn off his stove; maybe he had extra Christmas shopping.

The music over and the hour late, some of the crowd departs. The rest head back to the hall, where the bar is still dispensing liquor, although most of the appetizers are gone. Maureen Naley, a financial officer at the CIA ("I'm overt as opposed to covert"), is over by the fireplace. She's here because a friend brought her. "You can see people network," she says, as a high school classmate she has not seen in years comes up and reintroduces herself.

If not this, what? "I'd probably be someplace in Old Town, or a movie, or hanging drapes," Maureen says. Drapes? "Sure. It's winter, you know."

Linda's among the last to leave, long after midnight. She might have talked to everyone who was here.

"Last time when I left," she says, "I felt like I had had a party at my house."

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If you talked to all 350 people in the church that night, probably half of them would have said they were there because of H. David Meyers.

"He knows a lot of people, and he's easy to get along with," says one man.

"He's a great oboist, and he's so interesting. He lost \$7 million," says a woman.

"We went out once or twice," says a second woman. "He's got a neat scar."

Says another man: "I'm his brother-in-law."

All true. Meyers, now 41, was a baseball player at the University of Miami until he approached the ground from the wrong direction and caught 118 stitches in his shoulder. Much later, he was chairman of the board of Timesaver Inc., a Rockville marketer of credit cards. In 1984, Meyers says, "we had our problems. The corporation went bankrupt, and there were losses on the books of close to \$6 million. I had personal losses of over a million."

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But he'd rather talk about music. As a member of the Washington Chamber Players in the '70s, he noticed that at musicians' parties, the people who came seemed to have a better time than the players themselves. "These were," he says, "a great place for people to meet people."

Hence the idea for the Nightcappers, which had originally scheduled three performances this season, the last being Saturday, March 14. Audience response, Meyers says, has upped that total to include concerts on Friday, March 13, and several dates in May and June.

"Concert musicians are always thought of as being introverted, but they provide a real catalyst for other people who are not," he says. "I've always felt that if you couldn't meet a person at my party, quit. There's no pressure on anybody, which is why it works out so well."

Okay, it may not be that easy. But if not, there's the music. For one distinguished, fiftyish woman, her first Beethoven Nightcappers concert was a very pleasant experience. (Her name? "Forget it. I was already in the newspaper once this week.")

"The music's not the greatest—it doesn't sound as great as my compact disc—but I like the mix: chamber music, socializing, drinking," she says. "All the things I like to do."

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